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## Alcohol Use As A Contributor To Homicide

### A Longitudinal Study Of Alcohol Use And Homicide In Omaha, Nebraska: 1975-1989

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#### Background

There is a growing concern in both the popular and academic communities over the seemingly growing numbers of physical assaults and homicides. On a daily basis we are confronted with stories of seemingly senseless violence. For example, the lead story in the August 5, 1991 edition of the *Omaha World-Herald* states that the country is on a record-setting pace for homicides.

This report looks at one correlate of violence: alcohol use. The alcohol-homicide relationship is an important one, and the research reported on in this report examines patterns of alcohol use and homicide in Omaha.

#### Previous Studies

There have been many studies which have linked alcohol use and aggressive behavior. The pioneering work in this area was conducted by Wolfgang and Strohm and was released in 1956. These researchers illustrated that alcohol was a major variable in criminal homicide, citing that from 1948-1952,

This report is the second in a three-part series examining patterns of homicide in Omaha for the past 15 years. The first report dealt with patterns of homicide in the city, and this report deals exclusively with alcohol use and homicide. The alcohol-homicide relationship is an extremely important one, and this paper attempts to explain the nexus between alcohol users and homicide.

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approximately 54.4 percent of all homicide offenders in the city of Philadelphia had used alcohol prior to the commission of the crime. More recent studies on the relationship between alcohol use and homicide include studies by the Vera Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control, which demonstrated that alcohol was a factor in over half of all criminal homicides in New York City and Los Angeles, respectively. Research by Graeme Newman (1979) also illustrates that excessive alcohol use is an important factor in domestic violence. Newman shows that alcohol consumption by either of the involved parties heightens the violence. Research by Glatt (1976) and Richardson and Campbell (1980) also supports the alcohol/violent crime relationship.

The correlation between alcohol and violence has been established in literature which has shown alcohol consumption on the part of the offender or the victim to be a "legitimizing" factor or context for aggression (Arias and Johnson, 1989; Greenblat, 1983). Richardson and Campbell (1980) also showed that intoxication increased the proportion of responsibility attributed to the situation rather than the individual.

All of the previously identified researchers were quick to point out, however, that the presence of alcohol is not in and of itself, enough to prove causation. With reference to this warning, care should be exercised when trying to establish a causal relationship between alcohol and violent behavior (Pernanen, 1976; Amir, 1967). Nevertheless, the relationship between alcohol and violence continues to generate research because of its presence in so many of the violent crimes.

#### Methodology

**Measurement of Alcohol Use.** Alcohol use has been measured in many ways in the research literature, ranging from toxicology reports to self-reports. We take a strategy located somewhere in the middle: whether or not the inves-



**tigating police officer notes alcohol use in his/her report.** Police officers are trained to detect intoxication in suspects, and we suggest that this is a valid measurement tool.

**The Data.** Data for this study consists of information on homicides, including both victim and offender information, retrieved from the investigation archives of the Omaha Police Division for each of the 15 years studied in this investigation. Data collectors were trained to extract information on key variables using a structured data collection instrument. A total of 416 cases were analyzed. In over 95 percent of these cases, information was available for both victim and offender.

Descriptive data were gathered on all homicides that occurred in Omaha from 1975 to 1989. Variables extracted included:

- race
- gender
- age
- events surrounding the homicide
- alcohol use by offender and victim
- whether or not the homicide was gang related
- occupation of the offender and victim
- address of offender and victim
- number of offenders.

Homicide victims and perpetrators are classified into two general race categories, black and white. The white racial category includes homicide victims reported as white regardless of ethnicity. Not included in either the black or white category are Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Pacific Islanders. These individuals were excluded because of extremely small numbers, which limit statistical analyses and comparisons.

**Methods of Analysis.** Our research utilizes a dichotomous strategy. First we examine, in aggregate, the data for all 416 homicides in order to determine the extent to which the characteristics of homicides in Omaha are similar to those described in the research literature. Second, we compare the relative absence or presence of these same characteristics over time using simple percentages.

## Findings - Aggregate Analysis

**Type of Homicide.** Of the 416 homicides between 1975 and 1989, an overwhelming majority involved either family members or acquaintances. Specifically, 13.7 percent involved immediate family members (e.g., husbands, wives, offspring). Another 38.8 percent involved individuals living in the same household but not legally married, and 31.8 percent of the homicides occurred among acquaintances. In only 15.7 percent of the homicides were the victim and offender unknown to each other, and these occurred primarily in robbery situations. Table 1 summarizes the situational characteristics of alcohol use and homicide.

## Alcohol and Homicide

In 44.2 percent of the cases studied, homicide offenders had been using alcohol immediately before the crime. Victims had been using alcohol in 35.6 percent of the cases. There is a higher percentage of offenders using alcohol than victims, and these percentages remain fairly constant across the 15 years of the study. The percentage of victims who were

using alcohol at the time of death is approximately 15 percent below the widely cited national average of approximately 50 percent (Virkkunen, 1974; Mayfield, 1976).

When we examine alcohol and homicide by race and gender we get the following picture. Black victims are more likely than white victims to have consumed alcohol prior to being murdered. Where either blacks or whites were the victim and had been using alcohol, blacks numbered 61 percent or 81 out of 130 cases. Black males were more likely than black females to have consumed alcohol—83 percent vs. 17 percent. The same pattern also is evident in the white population. Of the 49 white victims who had been using alcohol, 45 (92 percent) were males. White female homicide victims were less likely to have been using alcohol than their black female counterparts (see tables 1, 2 and 3).

## Victim-Offender Relationships and Alcohol Use

An overwhelming 98 percent of the black victims who had been using alcohol were murdered by either family members or acquaintances. Among white victims who had been using alcohol, 94 percent were murdered by family members or acquaintances. **These data confirm the position that alcohol**

Table 1 - Situational, Offender and Victim Characteristics in Alcohol Related Homicides, 1975-1989

| Variable                            | Alcohol Use<br>Offender<br>(N = 397) | Alcohol Use<br>Victim<br>(N = 399) | Victim and<br>Offender<br>(N = 123) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|                                     | ----- Percent* -----                 |                                    |                                     |
| <b>Situational Characteristics:</b> |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Time:                               |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| 12:01 a.m. - 6:00 a.m.              | 53.6                                 | 45.7                               | 39.3                                |
| 6:01 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.              | 38.3                                 | 25.0                               | 8.3                                 |
| 12:01 p.m. - 6:00 p.m.              | 40.0                                 | 20.0                               | 6.9                                 |
| 6:01 p.m. - 12:00 a.m.              | 48.4                                 | 40.7**                             | 45.5**                              |
| Intraracial                         | 46.9                                 | 37.4                               | 86.2                                |
| Interracial                         | 41.1                                 | 31.5                               | 13.8                                |
| <b>Weapon:</b>                      |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Firearm                             | 46.0                                 | 37.9                               | 59.8                                |
| Piercing Instruments                | 51.8                                 | 43.9                               | 20.3                                |
| Other                               | 48.4                                 | 30.0                               | 19.9                                |
| <b>Homicide Situation:</b>          |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Family and intimates                | 49.1                                 | 39.6                               | 57.5                                |
| Acquaintances                       | 52.3                                 | 46.5                               | 40.4                                |
| Robbery and other felonies          | 27.3**                               | 6.4**                              | 2.1**                               |
| <b>Offender Characteristics:</b>    |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Gender:                             |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Male                                | 48.5                                 |                                    | 82.3                                |
| Female                              | 45.1                                 |                                    | 17.7**                              |
| Race:                               |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| White                               | 39.7                                 |                                    | 30.9                                |
| Black                               | 48.0                                 |                                    | 69.1**                              |
| <b>Victim Characteristics:</b>      |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Gender:                             |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| Male                                |                                      | 42.1                               | 84.9                                |
| Female                              |                                      | 24.2**                             | 15.1**                              |
| Race:                               |                                      |                                    |                                     |
| White                               |                                      | 30.1                               | 38.0                                |
| Black                               |                                      | 39.5                               | 62.0**                              |

\*Percent who had been using alcohol.

\*\*p < .05

Table 2. Offender's Use of Alcohol by Type of Homicide Controlling for Race

| Type of Homicide<br>(Situation)   | White Offenders<br>Alcohol Use   |      |       | Black Offenders<br>Alcohol Use   |      |       |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|------|-------|----------------------------------|------|-------|
|                                   | Yes                              | No   | Total | Yes                              | No   | Total |
| <b>Family and intimates</b>       |                                  |      |       |                                  |      |       |
| Number                            | 25                               | 51   | 76    | 72                               | 59   | 131   |
| Percent                           | 32.9                             | 67.1 | 100.0 | 55.0                             | 45.0 | 100.0 |
| <b>Acquaintances</b>              |                                  |      |       |                                  |      |       |
| Number                            | 21                               | 19   | 40    | 34                               | 42   | 76    |
| Percent                           | 52.5                             | 47.5 | 100.0 | 44.7                             | 55.3 | 100.0 |
| <b>Robbery and other felonies</b> |                                  |      |       |                                  |      |       |
| Number                            | 4                                | 11   | 15    | 6                                | 19   | 25    |
| Percent                           | 26.7                             | 73.3 | 100.0 | 24.0                             | 76.0 | 100.0 |
| <b>Total</b>                      |                                  |      |       |                                  |      |       |
| Number                            | 50                               | 81   | 131   | 112                              | 120  | 232   |
| Percent                           | 38.2                             | 61.8 | 100.0 | 48.3                             | 51.7 | 100.0 |
|                                   | X <sup>2</sup> =5.22 DF=2 p<.073 |      |       | X <sup>2</sup> =8.63 DF=2 p<.013 |      |       |

Table 3. Victim's Use of Alcohol by Type of Homicide Controlling for Race

| Type of Homicide<br>(Situation)   | White Victims<br>Alcohol Use        |      |       | Black Victims<br>Alcohol Use    |      |       |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------|-------|---------------------------------|------|-------|
|                                   | Yes                                 | No   | Total | Yes                             | No   | Total |
| <b>Family and intimates</b>       |                                     |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| Number                            | 25                                  | 55   | 80    | 53                              | 74   | 127   |
| Percent                           | 31.3                                | 68.8 | 100.0 | 41.7                            | 58.3 | 100.0 |
| <b>Acquaintances</b>              |                                     |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| Number                            | 22                                  | 25   | 45    | 27                              | 43   | 70    |
| Percent                           | 46.8                                | 53.2 | 100.0 | 38.6                            | 61.4 | 100.0 |
| <b>Robbery and other felonies</b> |                                     |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| Number                            | 2                                   | 48   | 50    | 1                               | 14   | 15    |
| Percent                           | 4.0                                 | 96.0 | 100.0 | 6.7                             | 93.3 | 100.0 |
| <b>Total</b>                      |                                     |      |       |                                 |      |       |
| Number                            | 49                                  | 128  | 177   | 81                              | 131  | 212   |
| Percent                           | 27.7                                | 72.3 | 100.0 | 38.2                            | 61.8 | 100   |
|                                   | X <sup>2</sup> =23.10 DF=2 p<.00001 |      |       | X <sup>2</sup> =6.99 DF=2 p<.03 |      |       |

is more likely to be a factor in homicide among acquaintances rather than by strangers (Cordilia, 1985; Vera Institute of Justice, 1977).

When our attention is focused on homicide offenders who had been consuming alcohol, we find that they are predominately male for both blacks and whites. Specifically, 78 percent of the black offenders were male, and 80 percent of the whites were male. With reference to type of weapon used among this category of offenders, an interesting pattern emerged. Whites used firearms in 48 percent of the cases, and blacks used firearms in 66 percent of the homicides.

**Family and intimates accounted for a higher percentage of the homicides where both the victim and offender were using alcohol prior to the crime. Specifically, in 56.9 percent of all cases, both victim and offender lived in the same domicile. In all but one of the remaining cases, the victims and offenders were acquaintances. This finding suggests**

**that alcohol tends to be a factor in homicide primarily among family and friends. In homicides occurring as a result of another felony, alcohol was a factor in only three of the cases, which represents 2 percent. The preceding finding has serious policy implications and will be discussed in a subsequent section.**

Other findings indicate that 86 percent of the victims who had been using alcohol were male. In each of the 15 years under review, there were significantly more males than females found to have been using alcohol. Blacks were more likely than whites to have consumed alcohol prior to being murdered (66.3 percent blacks, 33.7 percent whites). There were no victims below the age of 15 where alcohol was found to be a factor. The vast majority (82 percent) of victims who had been using alcohol were 15-34 years of age. These ages also accounted for the majority of all homicide victims in general. Like the victims, homicide offenders also were likely to originate in the 15-34 year age group (69.8 percent).

**What the preceding figures show is that both homicide victims and offenders are disproportionately young, male, black, and had been using alcohol at the time of the homicide.**

Finally, in cases where both parties were found to have been using alcohol, the firearm was the weapon of choice for both blacks and whites, followed by knives and piercing instruments. Firearms, however, were the overwhelming favorite, accounting for 63.8 percent of the deaths. Knives and piercing instruments were accountable for another 25.9 percent of the deaths, and other types of weapons accounted for the remaining 10.3 percent. Offenders who had been using alcohol were more likely to use a firearm than offenders in general (64 percent v. 61.5 percent). The use of a knife or piercing instrument also was higher in the intoxicated population (25.9 percent v. 21.6 percent).

## Conclusions

We began this research by expressing a special interest in the involvement of alcohol use in homicide. Again, the findings for Omaha on the alcohol involvement variable are similar to those reported in the literature. The involvement of alcohol in homicide, while fairly prevalent, shows no distinct increase or decrease during the 15 years studied.

The study of alcohol and homicide lends itself to the following conclusions:

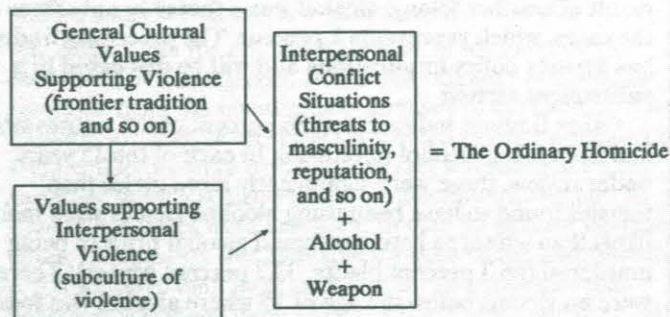
1. **The incidence of drinking related to homicide is highest among family members and friends.**
2. **Males who have been drinking are more likely to become homicide victims than females.**
3. **Firearms and knives were the weapons of choice for both intoxicated and nonintoxicated offenders.**

The three points stressed above provide some positive support for a model of criminal homicide (see figure 1) devised by McCaghy (1985). McCaghy's model and our data suggest that interpersonal conflicts coupled with intoxication and available weapons increase the likelihood of homicide. Alcohol may heighten the hostility among family and friends who are in disagreement.

The longitudinal analysis demonstrated an overall stability in the basic nature of homicide. While the basic characteristics of homicide may change from one year to the next, over the long run, they show a great amount of stability.



Figure 1



Source: McCaghy (1985).

## Policy Implications

Based upon the preceding findings, several policy implications are evident, and these implications may be grouped into three categories: **prevention, interdiction, and treatment.**

### Prevention

With regard to prevention, our study shows that high risk alcohol-related homicides tend to occur in situations where both the victim and offender were known to each other. Educational efforts are needed to teach individuals conflict resolution skills which downplay the role of interpersonal violence. This education could be performed in schools, churches and other community service organizations.

Again, as the study has shown, most of the alcohol related homicides are committed with a firearm. Firearms need to be controlled to keep them out of the hands of previous felons and persons with a history of drug or alcohol abuse. When alcohol is coupled with lethal weapons, homicides appear more likely to occur.

### Interdiction

A standard interdiction strategy centers around the role of the police. Police officers should be trained to deal with alcohol offenders as soon as they are identified. This training should include strategies for assessing the potential for additional violence, given the presence of alcohol in conflict situations such as domestic disturbances. Police policy on the handling of domestic/interpersonal disturbances should factor in alcohol use when making decisions to use arrest, separation or other approaches.

### Treatment

An increasing number of individuals who are incarcerated in our nation's prisons have been involved in or have had problems with alcohol and/or drugs. The corrections system must do more than encourage inmates to participate in treatment programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The corrections system should move more toward a comprehensive approach which includes alcohol rehabilitation, counseling and follow-up therapy. These strategies should be coupled with meaningful job training. This may prove more effective in the long run than simple drinking cessation programs.

Treatment also must be used outside of the prison setting in the sense of identifying potential homicide victims. Individuals who have been the victim or perpetrator of assaults or

other crimes where alcohol is involved should be mandated to seek professional alcohol treatment. This is especially true in cases of domestic violence where quite often both victim and offender have been drinking and have had a history of such behavior. If police and social service workers could identify these people and get them into the proper rehabilitation programs, this may have some impact on reducing the number of homicides that we see.

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